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research

Informal kinship care in rural China: the influence of Confucianism and attachment

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This article examines the role of informal kinship care in addressing the emotional needs and mental health, along with relationships, of school-age children left behind in rural China. Rural–urban migration in China has caused many rural children to be left behind in their local communities. Based on semi-structured interview data, this article explores Confucianism's impact on Chinese kin caregivers' understandings of children's needs and their childrearing practices to address these needs. Through the lens of attachment theory, this study identified a close affective bond between children left behind and their kin caregivers. This relationship is underpinned by kin caregivers' high commitment and love for children, and the Confucian concept of 'benevolence'. It not only provides children left behind with a sense of belonging, it also alleviates their trauma/grief due to separation from their parents.

Key words caregivers and Confucianism • children's needs • children left behind • kinship care • rural China

Introduction

Kinship care is probably the oldest and most widespread form of alternative care (Shivers, 2006). Existing studies have identified two types of kinship care: formal kinship care, which means that children's kin become approved caregivers under the surveillance of child welfare agencies; and informal kinship care, where kin caregivers take on primary care without the involvement of the state (Howard, 1994; Simpson and Lawrence-Webb, 2009). There is an increasing body of research into formal kinship care (Cuddeback, 2004). However, far less is known about the wellbeing of children in informal kinship care, who are the overwhelming majority of children who reside with kin (Howard, 1994; Gleeson et al, 2008). This is of particular concern for countries such as China where informal kinship care has not only been used by rural residents for centuries, but also is increasingly used as more people migrate to cities for work (Ye et al, 2010).

This article explores the protective role of informal kinship care in meeting the needs of Chinese school-age children left with their kin in rural communities when their parents relocate to work in cities. It forms part of a PhD study on the social constructions of children's needs, and this article is particularly concerned with

children's emotional needs and relationships with different groups, especially kin caregivers. We explore how Chinese kin caregivers' motivations and childrearing attitudes are influenced by Confucianism, which fundamentally promotes these children's attachments to their families. The concept of 'home' is socially constructed by people who care for children left behind and is based around relationship rather than solely about their physical environment.

Background: children left behind in China

China's industrialisation has boomed since the implementation of reform and Opening-Up policy in 1978, which encouraged and opened door to foreign trade and investment. Consequently, a significant income polarisation between urban and rural areas has been witnessed. Rural residents rely on their lands for household income, but now they have to face decreasing land per capita due to accelerating population growth and land appropriation (Ye and Pan, 2011). Many caregivers in this study reported that farming could no longer provide them with sufficient income for the family, and it was a major reason why children's parents migrated to cities for better incomes.

Western research has shown that it is not uncommon for rural areas to be in poorer condition than urban environments (Pugh, 2003). Similar findings have also been reported in Asian countries, such as China. Taking health resources as an example, fewer hospital beds and equipment are allocated to rural Chinese residents than their urban counterparts. Moreover, the disparity of equipment quality between the urban and rural is more significant than that of quantity (Li and Chang, 2008). In addition to healthcare, Chinese rural families also confront a high cost of education. The government has announced a policy that waives tuition and textbook fees in rural primary and middle schools. Nevertheless, the disparity between the rural and urban remains apparent, as the government's spending on rural compulsory education is much less than that in urban areas (Bao, 2006). To access higher wages and better services, many rural Chinese people migrate to urban areas. In 2013, the number of rural migrant workers reached over 166 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013).

In spite of the huge internal migrant population in China, their social inclusion in cities remains limited. The distinct division between rural and urban communities makes it difficult for rural residents to obtain an urban identity. The situation is attributed mainly to China's household registration (*hukou*) system (Du et al, 2005). Under this system, every Chinese citizen is registered with either an urban or rural permanent residency. Although rural residents are allowed to temporarily work and live in cities, their access to urban social services is heavily restricted. For example, rural children whose parents migrate are not entitled to the same educational resources as their urban counterparts, which means that it is difficult for rural children to join a public school in cities. To address this limitation, some cities have established schools specifically for rural children who live with their urban migrant parents. Along with financial restraints, enormous numbers of rural parents choose to migrate without taking their children. These children are left behind in local communities and cared for by their kin. According to the latest Census in 2010, there were around 61 million rural children left behind, who accounted for 37.7% of the total number of rural children (All-China Women's Federation, 2013).

While there is an increasing volume of local research on children left behind, most studies have focused on the negative impact of parents' migration on these children's wellbeing (Tang and Lu, 2006; Xu, 2009; Hu et al, 2011). These risk-based approaches have uncovered a variety of problems with regard to the behaviours of children left behind. Nevertheless, the emphasis on family dysfunction has overlooked some protective factors of kinship care (Luo et al, 2009). More importantly, most studies have relied on quantitative methods, and the subjective perceptions of children's needs remain to be fully understood. This article explores the needs of children left behind, through examining the social constructions of two adult groups, namely kin caregivers and school personnel. Special attention has been paid to the advantages of informal care and how such arrangements can safeguard children left behind, especially in terms of their emotional attachments.

Theoretical perspective: attachment theory

The types of human needs are extensive, ranging from physical requirements for human beings' survival to participating in social interaction (Langan, 1998). Similarly, children's needs cover diverse domains (Pringle, 1993; Brazelton and Greenspan, 2000). In this article, other than commonly recognised needs, we examine rural Chinese children's specific needs due to their parents' absence. To achieve this, two theoretical perspectives – attachment theory and the Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY) model – informed the research. The latter was developed by ARACY and has recently been trialled to assist any professional practitioners working with children to assess their needs and refer to appropriate services (ARACY, 2010).

An important part of this study's theoretical framework is attachment theory. As its name suggests, it sheds light on children's ties to their primary caregivers and disruption from separation (Bretherton, 1995). The theory was originally formulated by Bowlby (1989), who defined attachment behaviour as 'a form of instinctive behaviour that develops in humans, as in other mammals, during infancy, and has as its aim or goal, proximity to a mother-figure' (1989: 87). Attachment behaviours are the ways in which vulnerable children seek protection and care from adults, and these two components are essential for competent caregiving (Howe, 2003). Decades of research have provoked an array of concerns about children's attachment, and it has been agreed that parenting involving affective attachment contributes to optimal child and family wellbeing (Golding, 2008; Porter, 2009; Rees, 2010).

Bowlby used the term 'affectional bond' to further explain children's attachment to their attachment figures (normally familiar caregivers such as mothers). Affectional bonds are someone's attraction to another person (Bowlby, 1989), and development of such bonds is seen as a universal need for human beings (Howe, 2003). This bond is love based and provides humans with secure feelings (Bowlby, 1989). Children who feel secure and comfortable are more likely to explore their surroundings. Therefore, the affectional bond meets children's need to experience the world, as well as make sense of themselves and people around them (Howe, 2003). The bond stimulates interactions between children and their attachment figures, whereby the self-worth and self-esteem of both groups are developed (Fahlberg, 1988). Children's personality development is influenced throughout this process (Osmond and Darlington, 2001).

It is believed that when the mother figure is not available, young children are better cared for by relatives or familiar figures rather than strangers (Bowlby, 1989).

Of particular interest for this study, well-cared-for children normally encounter little intense distress and fear, and they are apt to respond to separation with less fear. Insecure attachment, on the other hand, restricts young children's capacity for coping with distress and challenges in their later lives (McLewin and Muller, 2006). This pattern also applies to school-age children, as different attachment styles developed with primary caregivers consistently affect the child for a lifetime (Yoo et al, 2006). It should be noted that besides mothers, attachment figures such as fathers, siblings and other family members can also be actively involved in children's attachment and separation (Rutter, 1972, as cited in Colton et al, 2001).

In addition to its implications in the case of separation, attachment theory also offers an explanation for kin caregivers' motivations. Attachment theorists reject that caregiving is a selfish behaviour. Instead, they believe that caregiving is oriented towards children's needs, and can be observed from caregivers' sensitive and responsive parenting (Shaver and Fraley, 2000). However, according to Rothbaum et al (2000), caregivers' sensibilities differ across diverse cultures, and their response may only make sense in a particular context (Simpson and Lawrence-Webb, 2009). This viewpoint is consistent with Rogoff (2003), who emphasised cultural variations in children's attachment, especially attachment figures. For example, Yeo (2003) used attachment theory to gain insight into Australian Aboriginal childrearing practice. Based on a collectivist culture, Aboriginal caregivers assume a social role given in a community and take steps to make sure that children are comforted and secure. Similarly, Chinese people are well known for a Confucian orientation with preference for kinship care when children's parents are not available.

Confucianism and Chinese children's needs

In most Asian countries, such as China, there is no specific framework for children's needs, much less a theory of children's needs. The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines the best interests of children, which can be seen as fundamental for understanding children's needs across different cultures (UNICEF, 1989). In spite of its broad application, the international interpretation of the best interests of children inevitably promotes formative changes at the domestic level (Alston and Gilmour-Walsh, 1996). For a rapidly changing country such as China, attention to the best interests of children can be found in its policy on disadvantaged groups. For example, the huge population of rural children left behind has drawn policy makers' and researchers' attention to children's equity, thereby shedding light on their physical, educational and psychosocial needs (UNICEF, 2013).

It could be argued that Chinese conceptualisations of children's needs are largely influenced by Confucianism. Confucianism is one of the fundamental philosophies underpinning oriental culture, and it has shaped Chinese people's understandings of the human condition for over a thousand years. Compared with other philosophical or religious systems in East Asia, Confucianism has a more substantial impact on Chinese people (Yum, 1988).

Confucianism highlights an individual's virtues in society, and it also pays attention to the needs and interests of ordinary people (Gu, 2004). Confucius promoted five basic virtues, namely:

- benevolence (*Ren*);
- righteousness (*Yi*);
- propriety (*Li*);
- wisdom (*Zhi*);
- faithfulness (*Xin*).

As a fundamental virtue in Confucianism, benevolence means to care about and love people, which is the foundation of being human. Benevolence especially implies empathy and care when an individual is exposed to suffering. In this regard, an individual's humanity can only be fulfilled through their kindness and care for others.

Based on this view of Confucianism, we can see the Chinese relative character of human rights. This relative stance means that human rights exist in individuals' relationships with others (Johnson, 1988). According to Confucianism, human relationships are the basis of society (Yum, 1988). There are five fundamental relationships in which most human beings are involved:

- ruler and minister;
- parent and child;
- sibling and sibling;
- husband and wife;
- friend and friend.

As familial beings, we are all naturally born and cared for by family members. Family and community are essential for an individual's survival and achievement (Cao et al, 2011). Indeed, caring for family members is seen as a moral obligation and part of personal integrity (Wong and Pang, 2000). Within the home and community environment, benevolence indicates a deep interest in attending to children's needs for love and safety. Kin show their moral integrity through benevolence for children, especially when children's parents are unavailable.

Childrearing practices in China are influenced by Confucianism to a great extent. Many Chinese parents consider children as part of 'flesh and bones' and so they treat children with sensitivity to make sure that the children are valued and well protected. However, the over-concern from parents sometimes also provokes children's struggle for independence (Lew, 1998). This also has been found to be associated with the 'one child' policy, as parents have been found to spoil the only child they are allowed to have (Jing and Zhang, 1998).

Although contemporary China is experiencing an increasing trend towards the nuclear family, extended family childrearing traditions still commonly exist, especially among rural residents (Shang et al, 2011). Generally, grandparents are the primary kin caregivers when children's parents are not available. Even in urban areas, 50–70% of young Chinese children are mainly cared for by their grandparents when their parents work (Li, 2005, cited in Jiang et al, 2007). Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese grandparents assume the role mainly based on their strong family obligation. However, this caring behaviour can be also seen as a reciprocal exchange, which benefits both caregivers and children in the long run. For example, after children have grown up, they are expected to take care of their caregivers (Chen et al, 2011).

Confucianism continues to have a dominant impact on Chinese people's lives, and has been confronting challenges in contemporary China. It proposes empathy and harmony, but also recognises some Western values, such as human rights and personal dignity (Weiming, 2011). These values have been strengthened by modern Chinese education, which promotes liberalism in terms of individual independence and autonomy (Fan, 2007). These changes not only affect rural residents' views of

children, but also have impacts on their childrearing practices (Naftali, 2009). This study advances the knowledge of Confucianism's influence on informal kinship care, with an emphasis on kin caregivers' relationships with children who grow up away from their parents, and the effects of cultural worldviews on the construction of children's needs.

Research design

A series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with 23 kin caregivers and five school personnel. The central research question that guided interviews was: *What are the needs of children in informal kinship care in rural Jilin Province, China?* Participants were recruited from the rural areas around Shijiapu Town, Jilin province in Northeast China. There is a central community in Shijiapu, and most residents live in 15 rural villages and depend on farming. Caregivers were eligible to participate in the study if (a) they lived in the villages rather than the central community as we were interested in participants' experiences in a rural context and (b) they had full-time care of a relative's school-age children (aged 8–14) for at least six months. In view of migrant parents' flexible working arrangements, the six-month criterion ensured the status of children being left behind and their kin's role as full-time caregivers.

As outsiders, we recruited participants with the help of the Bureau of Education in Lishu County, as it was not feasible for us to identify potential participants. This approach was considered as culturally appropriate and approved in our ethics application to the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Queensland University of Technology (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009). The Central Primary School in Shijiapu Town, which all the local children attended, supported the researchers' effort to reach out to participants, and respected the requirement for participants' confidentiality. Flyers to recruit caregivers were handed out to each class at school. These were followed up with direct approaches. Data presented here are from interviews with 23 kin caregivers from 18 households. The caregivers ranged in age from 42 to 71 years old. Twenty-two of them were the children's grandparents, the other being an uncle of the child who lived with her grandmother.

Two interviews were conducted with most kin caregivers (16). The first interview lasted about 30 minutes, and elicited information about the caregiver's family background such as how the child came into their care. The second interview, which lasted one and a half hours, explored the caregiver's childrearing experiences and their understandings of children's needs. We started interviews with a open question: 'What comes to your mind when I say children's needs?', which encouraged participants to talk openly and make sense of their perceptions with their own social identities (Willig, 2001). Our interview direction then followed participants' initial answers rather than prepared questions. At this stage, caregivers indicated their understandings of children's attachment to the family, along with the meaning of maintaining children's relationships with their parents, which are underpinned by Chinese Confucianism and family values. Semi-structured questions were only asked after participants had finished reporting their own meaning constructions.

Five school personnel – two senior staff and three frontline teachers – were contacted through the principal. We selected them because they all had extensive experience in working with children left behind. The interviews with school personnel lasted

around one hour, and questions were more focused on their own reflections and school resources available to children left behind.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim based on participants' consent. All the data in the study were coded in Chinese to preserve original meaning. Key quotes were translated into English during the following analysis. Data analysis was facilitated by using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo 9. However, the software was used only to organise codes and researcher memos (Weitzman, 2008). The manual process of identifying prevailing themes and developing the needs framework was guided by an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach (Smith et al, 2009). Smith et al (2009) developed several stages in the analysis of text, which enabled us to locate the themes and interpret participants' accounts in a particular context. We started with close reading and noting, followed by developing diverse themes based on exploratory notes. The emergent themes were then categorised and connected to each other.

Findings

The needs of children left behind as seen from the caregivers' perspectives were categorised into eight themes:

- emotional needs and mental health;
- relationships;
- empowerment and agency;
- safety;
- education;
- basic care;
- physical health;
- personal development.

This article focuses on the first two themes, which highlight children's separation from their parents. Confucianism's role in promoting children's attachments to their families is examined. Kin caregivers' motivations, which underpin the protective advantage of informal kinship care in addressing children's needs, are discussed.

Caregivers

Kin caregivers play important roles in meeting children's needs, and they also contribute to the permanence often found in kinship care (Lorkovich et al, 2004). However, providing care for a relative's children also brings considerable costs for kin caregivers (Mason et al, 2002). Caregivers in this study relied mainly on their land for income, and some of them also had casual jobs near their hometowns. Their income, along with financial support from the children's migrant parents, generally enabled them to meet the children's material needs. As school personnel reported, these families were usually more financially advantaged than others who had no migrant family members.

As noted earlier, almost all the caregivers in this study were the children's grandparents. It was not uncommon that caregivers reported multiple motivations during the interviews. We identified four main motivations:

- supporting their own children;
- love for the third generation;
- family ties;
- family obligation.

Caregivers generally showed strong intention to support the children's parents. The children's parents, as caregivers reported, had to leave home and work hard in the city. These parents made a living in this way because local farming could not provide an adequate income. Parents' migration was considered as being for the good of the family, especially the children. As part of the whole family, caregivers also wanted to make some contribution. While a few caregivers felt reluctant to assume this role, they believed that their own children needed them.

A 59-year-old caregiver shared a lengthy story that particularly demonstrated this embodied motivation. She had been married three times and worked very hard to maintain the family. Her son, however, did not appreciate her suffering and often quarrelled with her. Although the caregiver was extremely disappointed with her son, she still chose to take care of his eight-year-old daughter while he worked in another province. Our interviews showed that her son's behaviour had influenced her feelings towards her granddaughter. She was not sure whether her granddaughter would take care of her when she became elderly, and she did not expect any reward from caregiving.

Caring for grandchildren was seen as a complex experience. Despite a few complaints, almost all caregivers emphasised their deep love for the children left behind. This love was generous and inherent, as caregivers did not expect any reward for taking care of the children. These caregivers, who were mostly in their fifties or sixties, found new meaning in their lives from caring for their grandchildren. They rested their hopes on this new generation:

> 'Generally speaking, people around my age live for the next generation. We are now around 50. If it wasn't for them, we would have nothing important to concern. What's the point [of living] then? … We are happy if the next generation are happy.... Only with the next generation, we are proud and motivated to live.' (Caregiver, aged 57, worked on his land and cared for his eight-year-old grandson)

Family ties were a predominant motivation for paternal grandparents. Influenced by Confucianism and patriarchal ideology, most paternal grandparents considered children left behind as part of their core family who shared the same family name. Maternal grandparents, on the other hand, only played an alternative caregiving role when children's paternal grandparents were not available. Compared with paternal grandparents, maternal grandparents' motivations were based more on family obligation as extended family members. One of the paternal caregivers insisted that her 10-year-old grandson be cared for by her rather than his maternal grandparents. She was 56 years old and worked around 70 hours per week to raise the family, but said she did not mind hardship because the child provided her with energy and motivation. Since caregivers reported strong motivations to take care of the children, it was not surprising to find that their childrearing practices prioritised meeting children's needs.

Emotional needs and mental health of children left behind

Emotional needs and mental health were predominant themes that emerged from participants' reports. As an emotional sanctuary, home meant a lot for the children who were left behind by their migrant parents. School personnel expressed the belief

that children needed a place where they could have a sense of belonging. It was not uncommon that children had already been living with caregivers in the same household before their parents' migration and, consequently, their understandings of home included their kin caregivers. These caregivers provided a secure and stable environment while the children's parents were absent, so the child could enjoy comfort and peace. Children's sense of home, in this respect, was seen as more about people who they lived with rather than physical surroundings. As a 57-year-old retired female caregiver pointed out: "Being with me and that's her home." Caregivers maximised children's sense of belonging in terms of physical affection, and they believed that younger children were more in need of this attention. The common forms of physical affection included kissing, hugging and carrying. They usually responded to this need when children cried or felt upset for various reasons.

Many caregivers reported the children's need to manage trauma/grief due to separation from their parents. Although caregivers tried to assume a parental role, they reported that the children still saw their role differently. Inevitably, the children occasionally missed their parents and felt upset, so comforting them was a big part of caregivers' caring experiences. For instance, a nine-year-old girl was sent to stay with her parents during a summer holiday. She had been living with her grandparents who worked on their farm for a few years and had always been fine with them. But after coming back, the child could not help missing her parents. Her 63-year-old grandmother described her need to manage trauma/grief: "This time things were out of control. She cried for two nights, and said she missed her parents. She wouldn't go to bed, and kept asking me to call her parents and ask them to come back immediately…."

Children left behind in informal kinship care were often seen by participants as being inhibited and timid because their parents were not around. Although living with their kin, some children reportedly felt reluctant to voice their feelings. In this respect, participants emphasised the importance of entering children's subjective worlds in order to capture their thoughts. Most caregivers were sensitive to children's emotional mood, and they avoided situations that might make children uneasy. For example, one caregiver reported children's need to be protected from pressure or anxiety, which could provoke them into missing their parents: "The child's parents are away, so it can be great suffering for him if you yell at him."

Caregivers' sensitivity to the children's trauma/grief was also found along with their protection of children's self-esteem. As influenced by Confucianism, Chinese caregivers in this study were extremely sensitive to children's clothing, because the way children presented themselves in a social environment was closely linked to their self-esteem. For caregivers, it was important to make sure that these children could raise their head among others. This was especially the case if the children's parents were divorced. A 59-year-old grandmother expressed her commitment for her 10-year-old granddaughter:

> "As her grandparents, we are extremely frugal on ourselves. We save money for her, so she can eat and dress well. Other children have clothes to dress up, and they would make fun of her if she doesn't dress decently. Adults can suffer, but children shouldn't."

The need of children left behind for relationships

Children's emotional needs were reportedly met through their relationships with several groups, including parents, caregivers, other relatives, peers and even teachers. These relationships were centred on the children's family environment, but could also be extended to the broader community. Almost all the participants acknowledged the unique roles of children's biological parents. Caregivers and school personnel reported that they encouraged children to have regular contact with their parents. This relationship, as part of being a human, was considered as being rooted in children's nature. Although caregivers were close kin, they were aware of not being able to replace children's parents, especially their mothers: "Mum is still the best … no matter how well grandma treats her."

According to caregivers, children in this study reportedly relied more on their kin caregivers who had been actively involved in children's daily lives than they did on their parents. This relationship is one of the five fundamental relationships for human beings as advocated by Confucianism. For emotion and safety considerations, these grandparents always kept a close eye on the children and rarely left them alone. Therefore, it was unsurprising that caregivers reported a stable and trusting relationship between themselves and the children that sometimes even exceeded children's ties to their parents. After being left behind with their kin for a while, children became used to the situation and only missed their parents from time to time. Nevertheless, they reportedly became anxious if caregivers were away, especially for a long time.

It should be noted that the relationship developed between kin caregivers and children left behind is reciprocal. Many caregivers reported that they loved these children more than their own children, so they could not bear being separated from them. In other words, caregivers and children left behind were attached to each other, and any disruption of this relationship might cause trauma for both parties. Almost all the caregivers were willing to care for these children until they reached an age where they could attend college, and they expected to be prepared for separation from the children afterwards.

While important, emotional attachment to kin caregivers cannot meet the full range of rural children's needs. In addition to caregivers, other relatives also contribute to promoting these children's wellbeing. Confucianism sees individuals as familial beings, which means extended family members have an obligation and play an important role in Chinese children's development. As caregivers reported, relatives could protect, comfort and educate children left behind in many ways. For instance, one of the caregivers reported that he had several relatives who lived in the community. These relatives usually watched his grandson when the child played around, so the caregiver was not worried about his safety. Frequent interaction among community members is one of the advantages of living in rural areas, through which we also identified children's need to interact with their peers. There is agreement that peer relationships contribute to children's emotional wellbeing and development (Asher and Coie, 1990; Rudolph, 2010).

In contrast with parents and kin caregiver, teachers' guidance was reportedly easier to be accepted by children left behind. In Chinese society that features Confucianism, teachers play an authoritative role and educate students in both subject matter and morals (Su et al, 1994; Wang, 2004). Caregivers in the study respected and appreciated school personnel's contributions to children's care. One view indicated by most

participants was that outside their homes, children need alternative yet approachable figures to protect them and guide their behaviour. Most caregivers reported that teachers successfully assumed this role and won their trust. A healthy relationship between children and teachers supplemented children's daily care, which ensured children's safety in a broader social environment.

Discussion

In China, the term 'left-behind children' has been widely used by the media and scholars (see, for example, All-China Women's Federation, 2007). This term draws our attention to the situation of children being left behind rather than children themselves as human beings. Interestingly, school personnel in this study frequently spoke of left-behind children and their vulnerability throughout the interviews. However, caregivers rarely used the term and their expressions were more focused on children as part of the whole family. We acknowledge the impact of the language shared by the society on people's constructions, and use children left behind in this article to highlight their roles as society members, hoping to avoid potential discrimination against this group.

Confucian beliefs encourage the valuing of family, which is seen as essential for an individual's development. Children's needs in this study were addressed mostly through their families, especially caregivers. Family not only provides children with basic care for their survival, but also offers a secure environment that features and builds a sense of belonging and identity critical to their growth. This is especially vital for children left behind after they suffer emotional distress and grief and loss due to their parent's absence (Gleeson et al, 2008). Theoretically, children left behind can be cared for by any adults when their parents are unavailable. However, these children have been found to prefer kin caregivers. This finding is supported by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980; McLewin and Muller, 2006), which suggests that children prefer familiar caregivers who usually alleviate children's distress and fear.

Being children's closest kin while their parents are away, caregivers show their deep love of children, which we argue is underpinned by Confucianism, which advocates moral integrity through love and family bonds (Wong and Pang, 2000). Chinese caregivers' humanity can be seen as being fulfilled through their kindness and sensitive care for children (Johnson, 1988). Therefore, although this role has brought caregivers some burdens, they feel highly rewarded. These motivations are similar to those found in Western countries, which also emphasise family obligation and children's needs (Beeman and Boisen, 1999; Gleeson et al, 2008; Harris and Skyles, 2008). Children's needs, rather than caregivers' self-interests, motivate caregivers' caring practices (Shaver and Fraley, 2000). This is in accordance with the findings of Gleeson et al (2009), which demonstrate that caregivers' motivations to take care of children are centred on family attachment.

Similar to caregivers' affectional bonds to children, children have a need to connect with their families. Children's primary attachment figure is not always assumed by their mothers (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1995). This study has demonstrated that if appropriate care is received, children can even develop a closer relationship with caregivers than that with their parents. The affectional bond between children and their caregivers is particularly evident if caregivers are away. Caregivers also state that as they spend longer time together, children become closer and more dependent on

them (Shaver and Fraley, 2000). Undoubtedly, a stable relationship between children and their caregivers contributes to children's emotional wellbeing (Messing, 2006).

Bowlby (1951) stressed that for children younger than two years of age, the disruption of their attachment figures could cause long-term suffering. Although this study was focused on school-age children, caregivers also described how children felt anxious and depressed when they were separated. This was especially the case if the child was younger, and they were seen as having a stronger need for physical affection. As children grew older with caregivers, their reactions to separations became more emotionally regulated. Unsurprisingly, most children adapted to their parents' absence, partly because they had developed affectional bonds with caregivers and considered them as primary attachment figures. The children felt secure with these attachment figures because their caregiving provided them with a sense of home. The concept of 'home', as caregivers described, was more about people rather than physical surroundings; relationships were more central than place.

It should be noted that besides family members, school-age children also need other relationships to achieve their social interaction and socialisation needs. Children's relationships with their peers, one of the five fundamental relationships advocated by traditional Confucianism, were well documented in study participant reports. As children grow, they gradually extend their social circle and invest more time on peer relationships (Kerns, 2008). Supplementary to attachment figures, children's relationships with their peers, relatives and teachers facilitate their development as a social member. As found in Western studies, children's relationships with their communities contribute to safeguarding and meeting their diverse needs (Evans and Holland, 2012).

Along with children's relationship needs, caregivers' experiences also reflect what attachment theory calls 'sensitive responsiveness' to children's extensive needs (Ainsworth et al, 1978). Emotionally, such responsiveness is a need for caregivers to capture children's moods and understand their thoughts. Facial expressions were the most common indicators of children's moods found in this study, and caregivers either comforted or encouraged children according to their own understandings of these indicators. This conclusion could be found in several Western studies (eg, Ainsworth et al, 1978).

Chinese caregivers' responsiveness to children's needs is underpinned by one of Confucianism's tenets, particularly benevolence, in which empathy is advocated. This is especially the case given that children left behind are exposed to sufferings due to their parents' absence. Responsiveness found in this study can be considered at two levels. The first is caregivers' instant actions to children's visible expressions; the other refers to caregivers' sensitivity to potential stressors that might cause children's distress. As several caregivers said, children need a 'hassle-free' environment where they can feel relaxed and comfortable. The second form of responsiveness, therefore, is preventive in terms of aiming not to cause any pressure for children.

Conclusion

This exploratory study examined caregivers' and school personnel's constructions with regard to school-age children's needs in a rural Chinese context. The core values that were seen to underpin participants' perceptions were children's need for home and attachment to family. This sheds light on two predominant needs, namely

emotional needs and mental health, as well as relationships. Chinese caregivers in this study showed great love and sympathy for the children left behind, which made them extremely sensitive to children's trauma/grief. This reflects Confucianism's impact on caregivers' attitudes, which considers benevolence as a fundamental virtue for human beings. Compared with the physical environment, kin caregivers play a far more important role in children's constructions of home.

Despite separation distress and negative emotions found in informal kinship care (Sanghera et al, 2012), extra attention should be paid to the cultural context in which children's needs are constructed and addressed. Given that most studies have been conducted in Western countries, the findings of this study advance the current knowledge of kinship care in meeting children's needs.

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